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Morality

in

English Fiction.

JAMES ASHCROFT NOBLE.

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Morality in English fiction.

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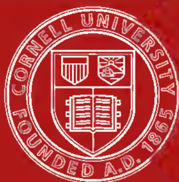

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Acad. May 28. 87. overestimate of G. Eliot.
what she writes is true. But she does not rise
to the height of great truths
Dickens in some respects healthier. To him wrong
& misery are temporary things, to be swept away.
G. E. leaves us with the impression th. they
belong to the normal condition of mankind.

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THE GIFT OF
JAMES MORGAN HART
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MORALITY IN ENGLISH FICTION.

Printed by
W. & J. ARNOLD, 18, REDCROSS STREET, LIVERPOOL.
1-12-1886.

MORALITY

IN

ENGLISH FICTION.

By JAMES ASHCROFT NOBLE.

AUTHOR OF "THE PELICAN PAPERS."

LIVERPOOL:

W. & J. ARNOLD, 18. REDCROSS STREET.

LONDON:

SIMPKIN, MARSHALL & CO., 4, STATIONERS' HALL COURT.

TO THE HONOURED AND BELOVED MEMORY

OF

GEORGE ELIOT,

GREAT AS A LITERARY ARTIST,

EQUALLY GREAT AS AN ETHICAL INSPIRER,

I DEDICATE THIS ESSAY.

Thy prayer is answered: thou hast joined the choir
    Invisible ;—the choir whose music makes
    Of life's shrill discords harmonies, and takes
Us unawares with sounds that are as fire
And light and melody in one. We tire
    Of weary noon and night, of dawn that breaks
    Only to bring again the cares, the aches,
The meannesses that drag us to the mire:—
When lo! amid life's din we catch thy clear
    Large utterance from the lucid upper air,
Bidding us wipe away the miry stain,
    And scale the stainless stars, and have no fear
Save the one dread of forfeiting our share
    In the deep joy that follows noble pain.

JAMES ASHCROFT NOBLE.

SOUTHPORT,
SEPTEMBER, 1886.

NOTE.

Though this essay is here reprinted from the pages of a little monthly magazine, which had a shorter life than it deserved, it was originally written not to be read but to be heard, and was as a matter of fact delivered as a lecture in various towns in the North of England. This will explain the presence of limitations which, in a serious contribution to literature, would be defects. Other defects it may have: these it *must* have; and being fully conscious of them I printed it for the sake of some who, having listened to the lecture, wished to possess it in a permanent form. I may add, in explanation of what will seem to many a curious omission, that the remarks I have made concerning Scott seem to me to apply equally to his great contemporary, Jane Austen.

J.A.N.

SOUTHPORT, SEPTEMBER, 1886.

MORALITY IN ENGLISH FICTION

(1741-1885.)

I.

"ART for Art's sake" which was at one time, not so very long ago, a novel maxim, not devoid of useful suggestiveness, has latterly become one of the most wearisome commonplaces of criticism. Many fairly patient people are so tired of being told again and again that art and morality occupy different worlds, that the painter must not preach nor the poet prophesy, and that in so far as art is didactic it ceases to be art at all, that they are tempted to rebel in sheer perversity and to declare that if this be critical orthodoxy they will have none of it. As, however, this is not a very rational impulse one hopes that in the majority of cases it is but momentary. There is a soul of truth in the maxim; perhaps as much truth as there is in most maxims; and he is but a poor thing who finds satisfaction in proclaiming that two and two make five, simply because he is too proud to echo those who have declared that they make only four. The moralist and the artist will each undoubtedly perform his own special work best in proportion to the clearness with

which he sees that it *is* a special work, with very palpable if not very well defined boundaries ; and particularly will the success of the latter depend upon his faithfulness to Art—the one master whom he has chosen to serve ;—the faithfulness of the single eye which, being always lovingly fixed upon some ideal which he must needs embody, has no inclination to wander in search of some duty to enforce, some dogma to defend. I, for one, feel so drawn to the real truth which the maxim endeavours to express that I often fancy I detect violations of the spirit of its teaching in quarters where even fanatical reverence is paid to the letter of it, and am inclined to think, for instance, that the poems in which Mr. Swinburne makes his melodious assaults upon the theological and ethical notions of the majority of his countrymen are, so far as this one matter is concerned, as truly inartistic as the metrical compositions in which Cowper inculcates his tea-table moralities or the little hymns in which Dr. Watts expounds his Sunday School pieties.

"Art for Art's sake" may be considered an esoteric doctrine. The ordinary Philistine knows nothing about it, and perhaps would not even understand an explanation of it, but in expressing his opinions he will not infrequently betray an unconscious adherence to its teaching. Even people who enjoy sermons which are sermons and do not pretend to be anything else will avow their distaste for those portions of *Paradise Lost*

which are cast in a homiletical mould; and even the most orthodox Athanasian finds their prosiness—that is, their want of true art—much more offensive than their heretical Arianism. And may we not say, on the other hand, that the universal popularity of Shakspere among the highest and the lowest is largely owing to the fact that he never troubles us with his "views," that he simply shows us his men and women acting and speaking before us, and leaves to Dryasdust commentators the exposition of his philosophy and his theology? Of course every now and then an artistic work of the propagandist order does succeed in winning the suffrages of the populace. Thousands have crowded to see *The Worship of Bacchus*, and the tears of millions have fallen on the pages of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; but Mr. Cruikshank's marvellous graphic power and Mrs. Stowe's singular gift of narration are in themselves sufficient to atone for even greater artistic crimes than they have committed. The broad fact, however, remains that, as a rule, pictorial temperance lectures and philanthropic novels are drugs upon the market which are destitute of appeal save to persons for whom they are *not* intended.

Shall it then be said that morality and art stand entirely unrelated to one another, or that to speak of the morality of a truly artistic work is a necessary absurdity? By no means. Art springs from emotion and appeals to emotion, and

as the emotions can hardly ever be absolutely unmoral it is almost a necessity that a work of even the purest art, from which didacticism is altogether excluded, should bring with it breathed suggestions of the moral atmosphere in which it was produced—that it should either exhale a perfume of the heather and the hay-field, or recall the sickening odours of the tavern and the charnel-house. This is felt even in an art like painting which deals with the mere external surfaces of things; and we recognise by an unerring spiritual instinct the transition from the moral world of Teniers to the moral world of Fra Angelico. Literature has, of course, a wider range than painting and a more extended expressional gamut; it can show us the realities that lie behind the appearances which to the painter are all in all; and as a necessary consequence the moral emanation—the *aura* as Swedenborg would have called it—is even more palpable and more impressive.

II.

Most noticeably does this *aura* manifest itself in fiction. The novel writer takes humanity as his province; he sets himself to shew us his vision of the world of men and women; and in proportion to the distinctness of the picture is its power to bring us into *rapport* with the writer's own moral nature, to excite the moral sensibilities which in him are acute and to deaden those which in him

are dormant. And as, with the passage of time, the art of the novelist, like the art of the musician, becomes more and more complex, as the mere story teller develops into the student of human nature, and incident is increasingly subordinated to character, it is inevitable that the work produced should become more fully saturated with the moral sentiment, and so acquire a deeper interest for the moral philosopher. No one, for instance, can fail to see how much fuller of ethical significance is such a typical nineteenth century novel as *Adam Bede* than such an equally typical eighteenth century novel as *The Vicar of Wakefield;* and this not because the former is more didactic than the latter, but because the life which it depicts is so much wider and deeper, the situations so much less simple, the moral issues raised so much more profound. There is morality enough in the older works; indeed what is called the "moral" is often made ludicrously and inartistically obvious, all the good people going off the stage at the close with a flourish of trumpets, and all the bad ones being visited according to their deserts in a most edifying and satisfactory manner; but it is morality of a somewhat elementary and childish sort—a morality which can be summed up in maxims as easy to master, and as devoid of stimulation when mastered, as the indubitable but barren mathematical statements that the three angles of a triangle are together equal to two right angles, and that parallel lines cannot enclose a space. The ethical canons

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a foregone moral verdict; but both unmistakably preach, and take special care that we shall not miss the application of the sermon.

III.

A few more words may be devoted to these two men, for they are really representative figures. Their works are perhaps the best because the most truly characteristic imaginative embodiments of the morality of Philistia and that of Bohemia. Richardson was a Philistine to the back-bone, commonplace and respectable, worshipping the great goddess Dagon under her modern name of Propriety. 'Propriety, our being's end and aim,' might have been chosen as a suitable motto for the title pages of any or all of his works. *Pamela* represents the triumph of propriety in the realm of comedy; *Clarissa Harlowe* the same triumph repeated in the gloomier sphere of tragedy; and *Sir Charles Grandison* is simply a representation of propriety incarnate—the awful duty herself in the garb of a fine gentleman of the eighteenth century. To extract the moral element from works like these and precipitate it for purposes of analysis needs no very profound study of intellectual chemistry. Richardson has a certain standard, the standard of the respectability of the day, and he tries to raise his readers to it both by showing them what a fine thing his ideal looks when it is endowed with life, and by pointing out that the

path of virtue is the path of safety, which cannot be forsaken without peril of imminent disaster. Unfortunately Richardson spoils by his eagerness the moral as well as the artistic effect of his books. He is so bent on showing us that virtue is intrinsically admirable and a good investment into the bargain that he becomes absolutely incredible, and we laugh instead of being convinced. His most morally impressive book is that which is also artistically the greatest—the book which telling of the heroic virtue of Clarissa shows us how it found its reward not in the cheap splendours amidst which we bid farewell to his earliest heroine, but in the solemn quiet of the grave, where the wicked Lovelace can no more trouble her, and she, the weary one, may lie at rest.

Fielding, like Richardson, appropriates rather than evolves an ideal, but he goes to a different world to find his ethical standard—that curious world of Bohemia where the Philistine virtues so dear to Richardson and his admirers are laughed at rather than respected, their place being filled by other qualities which though not indeed altogether incompatible with respectability are slightingly thought of in circles where conventional propriety is recognised as the one thing needful. The difference between the two writers is perhaps felt most strikingly in passing at once from *Pamela* to *Joseph Andrews*, a sensation easily though not altogether adequately accounted for by the fact that the latter was at any rate

begun as an avowed burlesque upon the former—a character it would doubtless have maintained throughout had not Fielding's newly discovered creative instinct proved too insatiable to find food for itself in the narrow field of mere travesty. So long, however, as the story remains a burlesque it is wonderfully successful, both as a satire upon the milk and water morality of the Cockney bookseller, and as an exposition of the writer's own robuster but certainly less refined and, from a merely logical point of view, less defensible ethical system.

Even during the perusal of *Pamela* we feel that there is a certain mawkishness about the picture which it presents to us; but when in the pages of *Joseph Andrews* we see the same picture, with the position of the characters reversed and the adventitious sentimental elements removed, we perhaps for the first time fully recognise the thinness and want of ideality characterising a piece of moral portraiture which, by such simple means as those employed by Fielding could be transformed into so ludicrous a burlesque extravaganza. Of course any work can be parodied, but when real nobility of ethical motive is obviously present the parodist is practically powerless. No parody can make any work seem absurd unless some gleam of genuine absurdity has been lurking in it unperceived; and in reading *Joseph Andrews* we do not merely laugh at the humorous conception of the young footman placed in the same equivocal position as the prudent waiting maid; we also

discern that the stolidity of Joseph and his utter blindness to the meaning of Lady Booby's advances have quite as much—or as little—of the ideal about them, and might appeal just as strongly to a genuine ethical enthusiast, as the judicious and unimpassioned taste for respectability and anxiety for her reputation which constituted the moral stock-in-trade of his sister Pamela.

Fielding seems to say "Take care of yourself by all means; be as respectable as you please if your taste leads you in that direction; but, for Heaven's sake, no canting protestations that this kind of thing is worthy of being called virtue. We are, none of us, particularly virtuous, but if I want some one to admire I must have some one more human than your priggish Grandison and your prudish Pamela. I must have men and women with generous impulses—honest, courageous, faithful; and I am not sure that I do not like them all the better for those slips and peccadilloes which harm nobody and show that they have other instincts than those of self-preservation." Fielding's moral strength lay in the keen insight which enabled him to detect, and the healthy common sense which prompted him to spurn a false, artificial, and altogether inadequate ideal; his weakness lay in a certain want of elevation, which expressed itself in an implied denial of any ideal whatsoever. His theory of life seems to have been that men and women are weak creatures; that any very lofty code of morals is nothing but

a collection of counsels of perfection altogether unrealizable in life; and that the highest possibilities of virtue are attained by the man who enjoys himself honestly with the least harm to any one, and is always ready to be charitable to the frailties of others because he knows he has so many of his own. His creed is, in fact, that of the average man of the world in all ages: it is not elevated but it is at least sincere; and if we cannot pay to those who hold it the compliment implied by a large moral demand we can at least say of them that they practise what they preach, and we can acquit them of the too common crime of poisoning the moral atmosphere of the world with the stench of whited sepulchre.

IV.

Briefly, then the morality which is to be extracted from the fiction of the eighteenth century is a morality of acquiescence in certain current standards. To men like Richardson the standard was supplied by society, the word society being used sometimes in a more and sometimes in a less restricted sense; while in the case of Fielding and his followers it was the outcome of a natural and healthy though somewhat unregenerate instinct. The years which have passed between their age and ours have witnessed a great political, social, and intellectual revolution, and the air is hardly yet free from the smoke of its camp-fires and the

dying echoes of its heavy artillery. A vehicle of thought and emotion so sensitive as fiction could not possibly remain uninfluenced by the new spirit of the age, and accordingly we are not surprised to find that the note of acquiescence has given place to the note of rebellion. Perhaps I ought rather to say of *dissatisfaction*, for when one speaks of rebellion against a current ethical code people are led to infer that it is a rebellion against its supposed undue strictness, whereas dissatisfaction suggests the truer idea of a protest which may take any form, and is as likely to be against laxity as in favour of it. When the critic attempts a contrast between the ethics of contemporary society and those of contemporary fiction he can hardly say that the circumference of the boundary lines in the one has a broader or a narrower sweep than the other; but he may say that they enclose differing areas, and that each circle must seem more or less inclusive according to the point of view from which it is regarded. I do not of course mean that the note of which I have spoken is heard everywhere with equal distinctness. The novels of Mr. Thackeray, for example, might be quoted by not undiscerning critics as ethically acquiescent after the same fashion as the novels of Fielding for whom he had so hearty an appreciation, and whom in so many vital points he so closely resembled. Such a verdict would be in large measure just, but the modern master wears his acquiescence "with a difference"; and it is a

difference which is easily appreciable by all who are sufficiently sensitive to be impressed by those *nuances* of treatment which are almost too delicate for definition, but which go to make up that undefinable something which we call a moral tone.

In no single essay would it be possible to traverse the whole field of nineteenth century fiction, and it therefore becomes a matter of necessity to select from the crowd of novelists a few names which may be taken as fairly representative. The authors whose writings seem to me most full of ethical suggestiveness are William Makepeace Thackeray, Charles Dickens, Charles Kingsley, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot. It may seem strange that I have omitted the name of Walter Scott, who assuredly stands in the first rank, particularly as I have included the name of Charles Kingsley who as certainly belongs only to the second. The inclusion must be justified later on; the reasons for the rejection may be briefly given at once. The fact is that the marvellous fictions known as the Waverley novels are interesting from a literary rather than from an ethical point of view. Even those German commentators who have discovered what Shakspere thought and felt about everything in heaven and earth and under the earth have never succeeded in extracting from his writings the moral philosophy of Walter Scott. They have not, so far as I know, made even an attempt in that direction, and this fact is surely sufficient to suggest to a superficial

Englishman the thought that such an attempt must be fruitless. No really great works of imaginative literary art are so markedly unmoral as the novels of Scott. Absolutely unmoral they perhaps cannot be, if only for the reason that we are affected by silence as well as by speech; but their ethical quality is so evanescent that it exhales before it can be extracted. Walter Scott did not, like his predecessors, expound the current morality, nor did he like his successors protest against it: he simply accepted it as a fact, just as he accepted the law of gravitation; and he has no more to say to contending moralists than to contending men of science. He was a *raconteur*, pure and simple, though he had too wide a knowledge of human nature, and too keen an interest in it to allow him to use mere lay figures in the evolution of his plots, and indeed as a matter of fact his men and women, at least a large number of them, are as life-like as any book men and women outside of Shakspere; but his portraiture is much more of an external thing than Shakspere's, more external even than Richardson's. His only care was to make his characters picturesquely effective; it was not necessary for his purpose that he should delve into the deeper strata of human nature, and consequently his *mores* are manners rather than morals.

Turning to Mr. Carlyle's fine essay to refresh my memory of his estimate of Scott, I find that the great critic uses of him the very word which

I have used in speaking of his predecessors. He says:—"One sees not that he believed in anything; nay he did not even disbelieve, but quietly acquiesced and made himself at home in a world of conventionalities; the false, the semi-false, and the true were alike true in this, that they were there, and had power in their hands more or less." It is a daring thing to indulge in a verbal criticism of a writer like Mr. Carlyle; but it seems to me that "acquiescence" is hardly the word to use concerning Scott because it implies a certain amount of the belief which is formally denied to him. Richardson and Fielding acquiesced in certain codes and became their apologists; Sir Walter Scott merely recognised the fact that a conventional code did exist, and troubled himself no more about it. If the matter had been brought before him he would doubtless have asked why more than this should be expected from him, and the question would not be an easy one to answer. The duty of a story-teller is to tell stories, not to embody any set of ethical conceptions; but it is really not a question of duty, for these conceptions will, as a matter of simple necessity, find their way into the books of any writer who gets beneath the surface of life and reaches the deeper springs of thought and emotion. This Sir Walter Scott did not care to do; his nature drew him to the external picturesqueness of the human drama rather than to its underlying pathos; and this is probably the reason why, though still popular

with youthful readers who have a natural and healthy liking for splendid pageantry and quick movement, he seems to have lost much of his hold upon many adult readers of the more thoughtful type. Scott has still intelligent and discriminating admirers, but the heated enthusiasm which he once excited is a thing of the past and its revival seems impossible.

The interest which is felt in the best novels of the modern school is obviously altogether different in kind from that which was felt by the early readers of *Waverley* and its successors. No one would speak of Thackeray or George Eliot as distinctively picturesque writers, nor would any lover of stories of incident feel specially attracted to their works. Charles Kingsley's novels are certainly full of vivid pictures, particularly of natural scenery, and in Charlotte Brontë's most popular book the mere record of events has an interest of its own quite apart from the emotional and ethical quality which gives the story its special charm; but the admirers of these novelists base their admiration on something entirely different—on the vivid presentation of human beings brought face to face with great and perplexing problems, or agonised by the stress and strain of the strong elemental forces of passion.

V.

In thinking of the novelists of the middle of the nineteenth century the names of Thackeray

and Dickens are certain to occur first to the mind, and this not because of the mere extent of their popularity, but because of its special character. Byron was in his day nearly as popular as Dickens and certainly more popular than Thackeray; but the popularity which he attained was largely due to what may be called personal considerations, while that of the two novelists has been owing to the attractiveness with which they were able to invest certain representations of human life. Both men were something more than mere story-tellers: they had systems of moral and social philosophy as definite as those of Richardson, and expounded them as clearly and persistently as their eighteenth century predecessor. There is a rough and ready method of placing these two novelists with which we are familiar. The general reader long ago labelled Thackeray as a cynic and Dickens as a sentimentalist, and the estimate by the people of works written for the people often contains a greater amount of truth broadly expressed than subtler and more nicely differentiated judgments of professional literary critics. Still, to say, for example that Thackeray's literary view of life is in the main a cynical one, may be in spite of its general truth, an inadequate and misleading criticism, because cynicism is a variable quality which may manifest itself in a hundred ways, ranging from mild tolerance of mankind to bitter hatred of it. Thackeray's cynicism has a superficial good nature and *bonhomie* which are so very

deceptive that some critics have been tempted to deny that it is cynicism at all, and have regarded it only as a kind of condiment intended to give piquancy to a dish of sentiment which would otherwise be slightly insipid from its very amiability. I believe, on the contrary, that the evidence which is brought forward in defence of this view really proves that the cynicism of Thackeray's books is really more potent and pervasive than that in the books of many writers whose mere language is much stronger and more uncompromising. The person who loudly declares from a house-top that he despises mankind creates more scandal than his neighbour who quietly assumes that mankind is despicable, and does not think the fact sufficiently important to be worth mentioning; but the latter is certainly the better or the worse cynic. In him of the house-top the feeling of contempt for his race may be but a transient emotional outbreak, violent enough while it lasts, but destined speedily to subside: in the quiet soft-spoken gentleman hard by it is clearly a settled habit of thought and feeling. Thackeray has certain habitual tricks of style which are apt to deceive readers who are not on guard. He will describe a base character or a mean action in such a manner as to leave an impression of high toned indignation; he will use words which wither and phrases which cut; and just when the reader begins to feel the glow of a generous sympathy with this high anger and is

about to exclaim—"Here is a man who really knows the difference between good and evil, and is not ashamed to range himself on the side of the angels," the cunning writer turns round with a placid, amused smile upon his face, and says, "You think that this is very bad? You are very angry? But what is the use of anger? You and I are very like this naughty person. You and I do things just as mean as this, but we have not been found out. Let us tolerate each other all round, and say—for sometimes these reflections take a pious turn—"God be merciful to us sinners."

Critical judgments are largely influenced by personal feelings and foregone conclusions, and at certain times every critic ought to speak for himself alone, and to admit that he is expressing only his individual tastes; but I believe I speak for hundreds of readers when I say that writing of this kind leaves so bad a taste in the mouth that we miss the flavour of the sprightly sketches, the happy hits at social foibles, and even of the occasional touches of tender pathos, which can be quoted by the score and which, if given to us unspoiled, would furnish such a delightful banquet. One feels that if the world really were what Thackeray represents it to be it would not be worth living in; that if all nobility were excluded from real life as it is from his picture of it society would be a spectacle which, to any good and thoughtful man, would suggest not a light mocking satire, but a wail of profound despair. This absence from the

canvas of true nobleness, of lofty figures wise to will and strong to execute, of men and women, large minded and large hearted, with power in their very glance to lift us for a moment above the level of small selfishness and amiable folly is not merely a suppression of truth but a suggestion of falsehood. Remove from a painting its highest lights, and you destroy the whole balance of light and shade. It is not merely that something has gone: everything that remains is changed. That lost something was what gave meaning and unity to the whole, and without it there is nothing but a confused conglomeration of lines and masses, of lights and shadows. The world is, as Wordsworth found it, unintelligible enough; but he does us a poor service who makes it more unintelligible still by hiding from us those sanctities and heroisms which light its gloom and glorify its waste places.

Of course we have all heard the defence which is generally made for this manner of painting men and women. It is justified as a legitimate and much needed protest against the method of some former novelists whose habit it was to depict monsters of incredible virtue and impossible vice, heroes untouched by frailty and villains who never knew a virtuous impulse, characters who were in the extreme sense of the word imaginary because the products of pure fancy unhampered either by the conclusions of reason or the results of observation. That such portraiture was valueless and absurd, both from an artistic and a

philosophical point of view is not a proposition which stands in need of very elaborate proof, nor is it necessary at this time of day to say a word in favour of a frank and healthy realism. But realism can only be frank and healthy when it is truly courageous, when it dares to give—or at least to indicate—*all* the facts and not merely those which are apparent to any careless observer. I can never admire sufficiently Turner's answer to the lady who told him that she never saw in nature colours like those in one of his sunsets. "No, madam," said the great painter, "I dare say not; but don't you wish you could see them?" Thackeray had not Turner's courage; and when he came to paint his human world he would have nothing to say to the scarlet and the molten gold but thought it best to confine himself to the brown and grey with which Smith and Jones are familiar, and in which, therefore, they are prepared to believe.

It is from one point of view a merit and from another a defect that Thackeray's novels are characterised throughout by what one must call —harsh as the language seems—a pervading insincerity. Their cynicism is earnest only in the same way that the passion of a great actor on the stage is earnest. It was assumed deliberately and for a purpose, and is to be attributed to the writer but not to the man. Thackeray, the man, was an amiable sentimentalist whose tears were always near his eyes and whose breast was full of the

milk of human kindness. He himself believed in nobility because he had for its existence the very best evidence, that of personal consciousness; but he found that he had fallen on an age of scepticism, an age which not only distrusted high ideals but felt inclined to laugh at them, so he quietly put his ideals on one side, and resolved that he would laugh with the age rather than allow the age to laugh at him. This, it may be urged is only hypothetical, and the objection may be at once allowed; but in criticism, as in science, working hypotheses are very useful, and I can find no better manner of accounting for the confused impression which Thackery's books always leave behind them, and for their deficiency in ethical weight. They are really enjoyed only by the cultivated classes who like cleverness for its own sake, and are regarded with indifference by the mass of readers who, when reading a book, like to be able to place themselves without difficulty in their author's position and attitude, and are puzzled when a deftly drawn sketch of a passing phase of society as seen through green spectacles, is presented to them as a picture of the permanent features of the world they know so well.

VI.

There cannot be much doubt that one of the reasons why Charles Dickens was so much more widely popular than his great contemporary and compeer is to be found in the fact that the ethical

element in his books is so much simpler in its nature and more direct in its appeal than the same element in the stories of Thackeray. In the works of the latter there is as much morality and rather more moralising than in those of the former, but Dickens' treatment of all matters relating to conduct is so earnest and direct that in reading his books we are tempted to say—"This man, had he not been an artist would have been a practical reformer," while Thackeray somehow gives many of us the feeling that he is in the moral region a sort of dilletante who likes to play with the realities of life because of the literary material to be extracted from them. Dickens was never happier than when he was writing a story with a moral as obvious and as sharply cut as the moral of one of Æsop's fables; indeed, after the *Pickwick Papers* he only wrote one or two works which had not some distinct purpose quite apart from any mere artistic end. He waged war against Yorkshire Schools, against the Court of Chancery, against popular political economy—against a score of real or supposed abuses; and he fought with such eagerness and persistency that more than half of his novels may he described as disguised pamphlets. He actually conceived the idea of writing a story to exhibit various manifestations of the vice of selfishness, and not only conceived it but carried it out in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, which may therefore be read either as a novel or as a gigantic lay sermon. In any estimate of Dickens as a simple

artist these facts might be used as evidence against him rather than in his favour, for it is a fault against art when a story is moulded by an intellectual or ethical idea rather than by a purely imaginative *motif*; but the inquirer into the moral significance of Dickens's work cannot but be grateful for the direct didacticism which makes his task so easy to him. Though Thackeray's books are so full of the moral element, one can never be quite sure which passage is to be regarded as preaching and which as *persiflage*, and consequently every sensible critic of this side of his work proceeds with the hesitating tentative step of one who in spite of all care taken may have got upon the wrong track; but the teaching of Dickens's novels is as definite as that of Franklin's homely sayings and so plain that he who runs may read.

Speaking broadly, his morality may be described as emotional. It is not the morality of the philosopher whose decisions are based upon a set of *a priori* principles, or of the man of the world whose views are based partly on tradition and partly on observation, but of the man of feeling, who judges passionately rather than intellectually, and makes his own likings or dislikings the test of right and wrong. Lord Macaulay said of Southey that what he called his opinions were in fact merely his tastes, and the same might be said with emphasis of Dickens. Fortunately, as his tastes were pure and, in the main, healthy, his

moral teaching is largely trustworthy; but now and then we hear him strike a false note, and we recognise, perhaps for the first time, the fact that his moral verdicts must be referred back, not to any large and fruitful synthesis, but to personal idiosyncrasy or even personal whim. Dickens's sentiment has therefore a tendency to degenerate into sentimentalism, for such degeneration is inevitable wherever individual fancies are substituted for broad views founded on careful observation and cautious inference.

Take, as an illustration, the opinion which Dickens apparently held very strongly and certainly expounded very assiduously concerning the comparative morality of the rich and the poor. Most cool and quiet thinkers speedily arrive at the conclusion that ideal virtue is not more likely to be found at one end of the social ladder than at the other; that wealth and poverty have their several temptations; and that Dives and Lazarus resist and give way to their special besetting sins in about equal proportions. Such a conclusion had, however, no attraction for a nature like that of Dickens which demanded that things as they are should be changed into something more in accordance with the desires of the imaginative mind. The combination of pinching poverty and heroic virtue was such an attractive ideal that Dickens refused to acknowledge that it was merely an ideal, and presented his readers with a series of pictures which, while characterised by a

certain surface realism, are in essence simple extravaganzas. Mr. Tennyson's later *Northern Farmer* held that "the poor in a lump are bad": Dickens not only seemed to teach that the poor in a lump are good, but attributed to them a kind of goodness which is in the nature of things stifled out of existence by the hardening necessities of a life of privation. The possible and actual co-existence of poverty and virtue is not to be denied, for it is a fact of actual experience; but though virtue itself is not the monopoly of a caste, its manifestations must be conditioned by its surroundings. We have no warrant for supposing that virtue in a palace is identical with virtue in a hovel. Those who know the poor best tell us that they find among them much thrift, contentment, honesty, faithfulness, and generosity, but that sentiment and its accompaniments are altogether unknown, and that, therefore, these virtues lack the supplemental graces which give the special charm to what is known as good society. To say this is not to bring an accusation against the poor any more than it is an accusation against the wild geranium of the hedge-row to assert that it lacks the glowing colour of its relative in the conservatory: both are simple statements of necessary facts which stand in need of no apology. The poor person of real life was, however, by no means graceful and picturesque enough to satisfy the imaginative demands of Charles Dickens, so he decked him out with all kinds of impossible

delicacies, and made him as sentimental and unreal as the shepherds and shepherdesses which were held in such favour by the minor poets of the eighteenth century. From an artistic point of view there is little to be said against this kind of portraiture if it be presented to us as purely ideal work; but from an ethical standpoint it may be condemned utterly as a gratuitous addition to the mental confusion which envelopes the very difficult question concerning the extent of the moulding influence of circumstances upon character. Many pages might be filled with similar criticisms, but it is only needful to say once for all that when Dickens's ethical presentations are misleading it is because they are inspired by vagrant fancy rather than by unerring moral insight; and, on the other hand, when they impress us very nobly and forcibly—and this is often the case—they owe their impressiveness to the fact that the writer does not summon us to witness the contortions of cleverly contrived puppets—as Thackeray very characteristically calls his characters—but of beings which, howsoever theoretically impossible are actually alive and have the life-blood of their creator flowing in their veins.

To say that creations like "Little Nell" and "Tom Pinch" are never found in real life is a criticism as sterile as it is obvious: we can only judge them aright when we think of them as beautiful and inspiring idealizations, which are good company because they hint at the highest

possibilities of human nature; and the fact that it ever occurs to people to judge them by the standard of actual reality is a proof how intensely real they were to their creator, how firmly he believed in them, and how adequately they embodied his highest ethical conceptions. In reading Dickens we often have an unpleasant feeling of effort, of stress and strain, of an almost hysterical striving after the production of certain effects; but it is probable that this arose from his anxiety to make his characters as credible to his readers as we know they were real to himself. We may, and many of us do feel inclined to smile at long-winded passages in which sentiment is exaggerated to the verge of absurdity, and pages of pathos in which the piling up of the agony, as our American friends call it, is ludicrously apparent; but the strength of Dickens lay in the line of his weakness, and his power over millions of readers is largely owing to the morbid sensibility which, though it made him cry over the sorrows of his own creations, enabled him also to touch the hearts of others as he could not have touched them by any mere literary trick.

Both Thackeray and Dickens have been widely influential, but neither has really supplied any number of ready-made views which can be set down and tabulated. Their work has rather been to render popular certain ways of regarding life; and its results are to be seen in all the popular literature of the day, in which nothing is easier

than to trace the divergent streams of thought and feeling, the respective sources of which are to be found in one or the other of the writings of the great novelists.

VII.

Wide as is the gulph which separates Thackeray from Dickens it is comparatively narrow when compared with that which separates both from such a writer as Charles Kingsley. The two masters of whom I have been speaking are novelists of society, high or low. They represent men and women as they appear to other men and women, and consequently confine themselves in the main to mere externals, leaving the 'abysmal deeps of personality' either entirely unexplored or explored only so far as it is necessary for the purpose of effective portraiture. This characteristic of their method is not either a virtue or a defect, it is simply an idiosyncrasy ; but then every idiosyncrasy implies a limitation of some kind. Charles Kingsley's world is not so rich and varied as the worlds of Thackeray and Dickens, but the life in it is more concentrated. The types of character are fewer, but they *are* types of character rather than of manners ; the pictures which are drawn for us are studies of individuals rather than sketches of society. The ethical current, confined within a narrower channel cuts for itself a deeper bed ; and we are therefore able to gauge its force and trace its direction much more accurately than

is possible in the case of those more diffusive streams which have no fixed bounds but make of the meadows a watery expanse. Artistic comparisons are generally somewhat unfruitful; but one cannot help remarking that though Kingsley was essentially a man of the nineteenth century he had really more in common with Fielding and Richardson than with his great contemporaries of whom I have been speaking. Fielding and Richardson were preachers *par excellence*, and in both we discern special features which reappear in their successor. Kingsley shared in a very marked degree Fielding's love for simple healthy humanity: he was no more afraid of that part of man which is allied with the brutes than of that other part which claims kindred with the angels; and he, like Fielding, had also a strong prejudice, which sometimes led him to the verge of injustice, against the self-consciousness which is produced by the substitution of some external rule for spontaneous and wholesome moral impulse. Fielding contrasts Philosopher Square, who regulated his life by the eternal fitness of things, with Tom Jones, who cared nothing about fitness, either eternel or otherwise, and followed only the promptings of his heart; and it evidently makes him happy to show his readers that while the philosopher is frequently found in situations which are so very *un*fitting as to expose him to contempt and loathing, Tom Jones always manages to retain our hearty liking even in circumstances

which prevent us from feeling for him a very profound respect. Kingsley has a similar though a subtler contrast between poor, weak, false Eustace Leigh, feeling his spiritual muscles every day like a weak oarsman to see if they were growing, and his noble, strong, and true cousin, Amyas Leigh, doing right without knowing it was right "because the grace of God was with him." These contrasted types appear in Kingsley's novels again and again, and the ethical significance of the grouping is always the same. Kingsley's characters, however, stand on a different plane from the characters of Fielding. We shall look in vain for references to the grace of God in the pages of *Tom Jones*, or *Amelia*, or *Joseph Andrews*. To say that Fielding cared nothing about the grace of God might be unjust; but it is certain that he would never have thought of including it among the great dynamic forces which mould character and regulate action. His view of life is not absolutely irreligious, but it is certainly non-religious. As a writer he knows nothing, and apparently cared not to know anything, of those emotions which at times are roused in every man by the conscious haunting of unknown presences, of those hopes and aspirations which have their object in something which experience has not suggested and cannot verify, but which brings its own evidence with it, and asserts itself with an emphasis which we cannot resist. With Charles Kingsley it is altogether different. He has not only a reli-

gion but a theology, and his ethical structure rests on a theological foundation, or at least is buttressed by "theological" support; a fact which is not only significant but embarrassing, because it is difficult to criticise or even to describe his moral system without pronouncing judgment, explicit or implicit, upon its dogmatic base. Still, though difficult it is not impossible, for in Kingsley's case, as in the case of all men of rich and deep emotions, we find that creed has its roots in character; that each article of faith is an answer not so much to a question of the intellect as to an insistent demand of the whole nature, and we are able to trace the ethical stream which runs through his books to its constitutional source without passing to note the channel of dogma through which it has travelled.

Without indulging in any sterile subtleties of analysis one may say broadly that there are two strong emotions which leave their mark upon all Kingsley's imaginative work—a love of health and a hatred of all kinds of falsehood. He might appropriately have adopted as peculiarly his own two of the most hackneyed of mottoes: *Mens sana in corpore sano* and *Magna est veritas et prævalebit.* His advocacy of what has been called 'muscular Christianity' was the outcome of both these emotions. Believing in the healthy development of the whole nature, he revolted against the Mediæval and Puritan feeling that in some sense the body is an unclean and vile thing, basing his

revolt avowedly on the doctrine of the sacredness of the shrine which had been made the temple of the Holy Ghost, but probably urged to it in the first instance by an exuberant personal vitality, which could not fail to inspire sympathy with all forms of harmoniously developed existence. But the protest was also made in the interests of veracity. Kingsley saw that the very people who were going about the world whining over their vile bodies and their worthless dust were, as a rule, the very people who gave themselves up to effeminate self indulgences of which the old Greeks—whose delight in the perfect activity of all physical functions was frankly avowed—would have been ashamed: and as a lover of truth he felt called upon to protest against so hateful a piece of hypocrisy. Whenever he approached this theme his enthusiasm was so thoroughly aroused that there seemed a danger of its overmastering his sane judgment, and he was not altogether free from the falsehood of extremes. It is impossible for any critic with a fair degree of moral sensitiveness to deny that Frank Headley, the curate, in *Two Years Ago* stands on a higher moral platform than Tom Thurnall, attractive and likeable as that young gentleman undoubtedly is; but it is clear that our admiration is demanded primarily for the latter, and in all Kingsley's books the *chiaroscuro* is so managed that the highest light is always thrown upon some figure of the Thurnall type, some character distinguished

by breath and activity rather than by intensity and subtlety of nature, one who acts from spontaneous impulse rather than from elaborated reflection, and in whom the general rightness of the impulse is guaranteed by the constitutional healthiness of the whole being.

In these vital characteristics Kingsley bore a strong resemblance to the author of *Tom Jones;* in his general methods of presentation he is a follower of the author of *Sir Charles Grandison.* Many people now-a-days do not consider Richardson a morally elevating writer or regard his books as wholesome pabulum for *jeunes filles.* When the young lady caught Charles Lamb reading *Pamela,* and wished to read with him, even that unconventional and emancipated critic tells us he wished it had been any other book. This feeling is, however, simply the result of a change in the public taste. Richardson's novels were considered intensely moral both by their writer and his contemporaries, and it is abundantly clear that they were written with a distinct ethical purpose. Richardson was not primarily an artist: that is, the artistic instinct was not the strongest in him: he was above all things a moralist who chose to run his moralisings into an artistic mould. In the same way Kingsley was primarily a preacher, and though his sermons are very skilfully interwoven with the thread of his narratives, it cannot be said that the homiletic element is entirely absorbed, as it ought to be if artistic

requirements are to be satisfied. Thackeray and Dickens were preachers in their way, but one may enjoy *Vanity Fair* without regarding it as a long-drawn impeachment of snobbishness and humbug, and though *Martin Chuzzlewit* was intended to be an imaginative manifesto against selfishness it has certainly been read with intense zest by thousands of persons who have had no suspicion of the fact. Such reading and enjoyment of Kingsley's stories is all but impossible. His novels have fine artistic qualities, but they are really parables rather than novels, pure and simple, and they can only be adequately valued by people who are in sympathy with the ethical thought and sentiment which they hold in solution. Enthusiasm for Kingsley as a novelist is hardly ever found uncombined with enthusiasm for him as a theologian, a politician, and a social reformer; nor would Kingsley have valued even the most ardent appreciation of the body of his work unaccompanied by sympathy with its indwelling soul.

VIII.

The note of rebellion against current ethical standards, or of dissatisfaction with them, which I spoke of as a distinctive characteristic of the fiction of the nineteenth century is perhaps more clearly heard in the writings of Charlotte Brontë than in those of the novelists of whom mention has already been made. Thackeray, Dickens,

and Kingsley were all more or less men of the world, mixing freely in society where axioms hostile to their own found constant utterance; and, though a strong individuality will not suffer itself to be overborne by the pressure of a throng, the necessity for diminishing friction to the greatest possible extent must result in a gradual adaptation to a hostile environment, in the course of which the dissenter from current modes of thought and feeling ceases to be an armed rebel and becomes a constitutional leader of opposition, having some common ground with his opponents, and being always ready to exchange with them the courtesies of civilized conflict. Charlotte Brontë on the other hand was a woman of singularly intense nature, living far from the madding crowd; knowing practically as little of what is thought and felt there as an infant; having an eye keen to discern a social anomaly, and a heart quick to feel sympathetically the pain inflicted by a social wrong; but without any real experience of that beneficent working of things by which in actual life anomalies lose much of their absurdity, and undeserved pangs have a tendency to become less frequent and less severe. A social theorist who forms his theories from the materials provided by study and introspection rather than by experience is certain to be a revolutionist, because in the view of the world which presents itself to him the something amiss—the startling and perplexing element—acquires a distinctness and prominence

which does not of right belong to it, just as in a poor photograph the unpleasing peculiarity of feature which in the living face is conquered almost out of recognition by some perennial gleam of vigour or glance of sweetness is made the presiding demon of the countenance. When, too, we remember that the cartoons on the walls of Charlotte Brontë's chamber of imagery were supplemented only by her small but strange collection of living models—her father, her brother Branwell, her sister Emily, and the wild dwellers on the wild Yorkshire moors—we can hardly wonder that her habitual attitude with regard to society was an attitude of revolt.

It has often struck me that in spite of many surface differences, which no one can miss, there was a strong emotional affinity between the natures of Charlotte Brontë and Percy Bysshe Shelley; and I am rather surprised that the resemblance has not been noticed even by Mr. Swinburne, whose admiration for both writers, based on true sympathy, is so profound that its expression frequently passes the limits of true literary sanity. Whenever I read Charlotte Brontë's expressed or implied denunciations of the conventionalities of which she knew so little, I am forcibly reminded of Shelley's shrieks against the "anarch custom," the nature of whose power he so entirely misunderstood. The unhealthy and, we may surely say unnatural, passion of Laon and Cythna in the first edition of the poem now called *The Revolt of*

Islam finds its equivalent in the scenes in which Rochester confides the story of his amours to the youthful governess of his ward. There was, however, even in this matter a notable difference between the poet and the novelist. Shelley was a conscious rebel, and gloried in his rebellion: Charlotte Brontë was to an almost incredible extent unconscious of her own revolt from accepted traditions; and nothing could be more humorous were it not so pathetic, than the letter which she wrote to a friend anxiously enquiring whether there really were anything so very wrong in Jane Eyre.

Some injustice has, I think, been done to the early adverse critics of that remarkable novel. They were wrong; but they were not wrong without reasons which were, to a certain extent, good reasons. It is absurd to judge them by the light of our knowledge and to speak of them as it would be just to speak if they had knowingly and wilfully maligned a pure and noble being. To declare, as a reviewer in the *Quarterly* declared that the writer of *Jane Eyre* must be a woman who had forfeited the society of her sex was wanton and brutal; but if the critic had simply said that it was hardly a book to be placed in the hands of a girl of eighteen with a turn of casuistical subtleties I do not know that the judgment could have been reasonably complained of.

In speaking here of Charlotte Brontë I shall confine myself to this one book, partly for the sake of brevity; partly because in it, as in many

first books, the leading outlines of its author's mind are most clearly discernible; and partly because I do not find in *Shirley* and *Villette* any new ethical element which stands in need of exposition. I hope I shall not be called a Puritan or a Philistine if I say that the morality of Charlotte Brontë's work always strikes me as being radically unhealthy. The ethical quality of the productions of any novelist whose experience of life was so narrow and so painful as hers must be either morbidness or weakness; and it is hard to see how *Jane Eyre* can be considered anything but morbid in spite of its singular power. The objection to its whole conception is that the abnormal is treated as if it were the normal, and the reader is led to make wide ethical generalizations from a series of really exceptional instances. The relations between Jane and Rochester, and between Jane and St. John Rivers, are treated not as curious examples of what life, the great surpriser, may have in store for us, but as matters of course, presenting problems to be solved not only by rarely tried spirits but by the generality of ordinary men and women. The hackneyed objection to fiction made by our serious grandmothers, that it gave false views of life, is really valid when urged against such a book as this; and the false conception is rendered all the more delusive by the impressive vigour of the portraiture which makes Jane and Rochester so much more living and realisable to us than many other characters of

fiction who are, as the common phrase has it, truer to nature. In *Jane Eyre* the furnace of emotion is heated seven times more than it is wont to be heated in the healthy life of every day; the atmosphere is that of a Turkish bath, but there is no welcome douche to brace up the relaxed tissues of feeling. The domain of the novelist is of course as wide as life itself, and in life we all with Robert Browning, can

> "discern
> Infinite passion, and the pain
> Of finite hearts that yearn."

But life has other elements than these infinite passions and painful yearnings, and a story in which the heart-strings are throughout stretched to the point of breaking, in which the emotional strain is never relaxed, is a story to which it is impossible to attribute a large imaginative grasp, howsoever frequently in single passages we may come across gleams of true imaginative insight; and as imagination is not only a delight-giving but a really sanative quality, the absence of its higher manifestations implies a lack of wholesomeness as well as of pleasantness.

In speaking of the ethical aspect of Charlotte Brontë's works I have endeavoured rather to indicate the nature of their moral atmosphere than to extract from them any definite teaching, and indeed when this nature is once apprehended the character of any special verdict may be confidently predicted. If passion fill so large a space in life it is clear that its sway must be coterminous

with its territory; and although the great emotional crisis of the book to which reference has all along been made is the renunciation by Jane of the delights of love in obedienoe to the higher call of conscience, the author's passionate instincts overpower her deliberate intent, and while the story inspires us with a certain cold admiration for the self-abnegating heroine, our sympathy in spite of ourselves goes out to Rochester, deprived by a cruel blow of the solacing and restoring draught for which, through all his warped and wasted life, he had thirsted in vain.

It is quite possible for a man or a woman of the highest and purest morality to hold the opinion that a person situated as Rochester was situated is justified in ignoring such ceremonial ties as those by which he was bound, but a person who does hold it must expect rough handling from the crowd, which settles all delicate cases of conscience either by rule of thumb or by conventional law; and even those who feel inclined to sympathise with the answer which *Jane Eyre* undoubtedly suggests may be of opinion that a work of art is hardly the place in which the question should be put. This is certainly the view which appeals to me. There are moral problems which any of us may, in some supreme moment be called upon to solve; but they are problems from which we would escape if we could, and few healthy minds would care to ante-date them in imaginative anticipation. This is what such a

book as *Jane Eyre* compels us to do. For the time being we speculate and doubt and agonise with Jane and with Rochester, and, whatever the decision at which we arrive, the result is a loss of emotional force for which we have no compensation. We have not even established a precedent for future use, for every case of conscience has its own special difficulties; and if the general circumstances should ever happen to repeat themselves in our own personal history, there would certainly be particular features which would deprive our ready-made conclusion of all practical value, and compel us to tread once more the weary round of speculation and doubt and agony.

IX.

Let me use once more that metaphor of the moral atmosphere. It is not new, but it is convenient and comprehensible, and it will serve to point a contrast between the author of *Jane Eyre* and the next and last of the writers chosen as representative English novelists. Most of us have known what it is to step out of the heated ball-room, with its glare of gas and scraping of catgut and hum of talk and ripple of laughter, or from the bright study fireside where in an atmosphere of cigar smoke the weighty argument has been parried by the happy jest, and the strife of tongues has waxed fast and furious, into the spacious darkness and impressive silence of the open street or lane, where the clear air of night is

keen and bracing, and tranquil stars look down. The emotion which comes at such a moment is vivid and rememberable, and it is in all essential respects the analogue of the feeling with which we pass from the books of Charlotte Brontë to those of George Eliot. Let me chose as the first point of view one from which the contrast between the ethical treatment of the two writers is most plainly discernible, before passing to others from which can be better observed the whole course of the ethical current which flows through George Eliot's books. I have said that in the writings of Charlotte Brontë—and notably in her first and most popular work—the crises almost always turn on the solution of "cases of conscience," and they are cases in which the difficulty is to settle the opposing claims of passion and duty. Now, in George Eliot's books there are also such cases, and in observing the method of their presentation and settlement we are able to feel most keenly the difference, in the elements of the two atmospheres, between the depressing carbonic acid of of the one and the invigorating ozone of the other. In the third volume of *The Mill on the Floss*, to take one instance out of several, Maggie Tulliver finds herself in a position similar in many essential respects to that occupied by Jane Eyre at the great turning point of her history. A master passion has laid hold upon her, and not only the hand of love but the equally strong hand of fateful circumstance draws her towards a fair land

of promise to which she has come near enough to catch a sight of its fair meadows, a breath of the odour of its fragrant flowers. But another hand still stronger, still diviner, is held out to her; a voice speaks to her heart more loudly, more insistently than the pleading voice of Stephen speaks to her ear, and she is fain to follow the higher leading. So far as the broad external features of the two stories are concerned they are identical. Both Jane and Maggie are tempted by love to forsake duty, and both with sad firmness follow duty and turn their backs on love. But what different moral impressions are left behind by the contemplation of the two conflicts. Of one I have already spoken, and have striven to show that the chapters which tell the story of Jane Eyre's parting from Rochester are ethically unsatisfying, not only because the case is treated after the narrow manner of the casuist rather than after the broad manner of the moral philosopher, the renunciation being thus made a matter of purely individual interest with but little power of general stimulation; but also because the result is to leave a sense of jarring discord between our judgment and our emotions—a discord so marked that most of us are satisfied to accord to the dutiful Jane the tribute of a cold approval, reserving for the suffering Rochester the richer gift of the heart's sympathy. In George Eliot's story all is changed. The record of Maggie's decision has the force of a moral tonic, because, without any of the direct

didacticism which is always an artistic blot, we are able to discern behind the mere history the presence of those great laws of obligation which, because of their inclusive simplicity, are universally applicable. Maggie's moral insight enables her to discern not merely the right for herself and for the moment, but for all persons and for all times; and her cry from the depths is not a mere individual utterance, but the call of the universal soul when it hears the summons to leave the valleys of ease for the mount of painful renunciation.

The passionate conviction which lies behind all great surrenders, whatsoever be the special circumstances amid which they are achieved, finds expression in Maggie's memorable and inspiring words:—"Faithfulness and constancy mean something else besides doing what is easiest and pleasantest to ourselves. They mean renouncing whatever is opposed to the reliance others have in us—whatever would cause misery to those whom the course of our lives has made dependent on us. . . . . . We can't chose happiness either for ourselves or for others: we can't tell where that will lie. We can only choose whether we will indulge ourselves in the present moment, or whether we will renounce that for the sake of obeying the divine voice within us, for the sake of being true to all the motives that sanctify our lives."

The moral significance of such a struggle and such a victory as this is practically inexhaustible, and to be permitted to witness it is to have in

the heart henceforward a stimulating and quickening memory. And just because of the nature of the conflict; because we see that Maggie yields not to some dead external law which happens to oppose itself to the living forces of passion, but to a vital something within her which lies deeper, and is a more constant element of her nature, a truer part of herself, than even her love for Stephen, we follow her along the dreary road of renunciation, not with a sigh of regret for a sweet joy slain, but with a low song of triumph for the dearer joy which has been achieved. There is all the difference in the world between the spectacle of duty recognised and obeyed with a stoical submission which confers strength for the strangling in cold blood of a full-grown passion, and that other spectacle of duty recognised with a thrill of rapture as a thing to be loved even more than love; as an ineffable, all controlling, all worshipful loveliness to which the cherished passion is tearfully but unfalteringly offered not as a murdered darling but as a living sacrifice. George Eliot is no more insensitive than Charlotte Brontë to the pang which the high rapture of a passionate renunciation brings with it, but even this pang is something else than mere pain, and in the final analysis we can always "tell it from pain by its being what we would choose before anything else because our souls see that it is good."

Ordinary novelists have two ways of appealing to the moral sensibilities of their readers. The

first is the old expedient of poetical justice, by means of which the perplexities and anxieties which distress us through two volumes are abundantly compensated for by the union of virtue and prosperity in the third. This is the appeal through the avenue of pleasure. The second is the more modern plan, principally favoured by feminine writers, of harrowing our souls by the spectacle of virtue trampled upon by victorious vice, of suffering goodness crying in agony, 'How long, O Lord! how long?' and getting no answer to its piteous pleading. This is the appeal through the avenue of pain. Neither of these expedients suffices for George Eliot. She is too keen an observer and too veracious a painter to give as a fair representation of reality the picture of goodness crowned with flowers, for she knows too well how often it has to wear through life the thorny coronal; but she has too clear an imaginative insight, too strong a faith that the governing laws of the world are not mechanical but moral, too ardent and unconquerable a trust in the something which makes for righteousness, to allow her to draw a picture in which no ray of divine light falls upon the sufferer's face, to sing a song the last note of which is indistinguishable from a wail of despair. She can feel the burden and the mystery of life; but she knows how even if the burden remain unlifted it can be borne with a deep, still joy which renders the bearer half unconscious of the weight; how the mystery has a

ivine clue which may be discerned in hours of
ısight and held tenaciously through hours of
loom.

The verdict we sometimes hear passed—that
·eorge Eliot's books are melancholy is of all
ossible criticisms the most irrelevant and point-
:ss. *Life* is melancholy to everyone who can
rasp its larger aspects, though there is room in
for childish laughter and manhood's solemn
›ys; and the true philosophy is found not by
ıose who deny its sadness but by those who dis-
›ver its possibilities of conquering rapture. It is
› the story of *Middlemarch* that perhaps the
reatest number of objections on this score have
een made. The book is sad enough, but in spite
f its sadness it is healthy to the core, and leaves
o impression of morbidness behind it, because
ıe writer makes us feel that she paints life with
passionate accuracy; that the tone of sober
›lour is local, not reflected; that it is inherent
ı the facts themselves, and not imparted by the
ersonal atmosphere through which she surveys
ıem. The higher lives in *Middlemarch*, as in
'he Mill on the Floss and *Romola*, are more or
ss failures; the grand ideals cherished so stren-
ously and pursued so persistently are never
:alised; and the only careers which seem in any
ıeasure rounded and complete are those of the
arrow and superficial souls upon whom the
ıadow of a great purpose or an exalted aim has
ever been cast. The marvel of the book lies in

the fact that when we have been shewn all this—and shewn with such terrible insistent power—we are left with the conviction that the higher life, the life of great ideals never attained and of divine hopes never fulfilled, is, in spite of all its failures and disappointments, not merely the higher but also the preferable life,—that we would rather ten thousand times be Dorothea and Lydgate with their wrecked, broken careers than we would be Celia and Sir James Chettam and Mr. Brooke with their placidly fulfilled existence and their commonplace contents.

There is, perhaps, a certain sense in which it is true that the sadness of life looms larger in the pages of George Eliot than it ought to do in a picture professing to be a literal transcript of reality. In one of her shorter stories she makes use of a striking and eminently characteristic phrase, "the painful right"; and there may be some ethical exaggeration in the constancy with which in her books the highest life is represented as necessarily a life of agonising renunciation. Here and there we see a nobly moulded figure such as Adam Bede, Dinah Morris, or Daniel Deronda, who seems to have, as it were, a genius for goodness; who can always say to Duty, the stern lawgiver—

> "thou dost wear
> The Godhead's most benignant grace,
> Nor know we anything so fair
> As is the smile upon thy face";

but by far the greater number of her most

memorable creations are men and women for whom the pathway of purity lies not through the green pastures and beside the still waters, but along the stony highway and in the midst of the purgatorial fire, to whom the inward peace of a nature at harmony with itself and with its high ideal can only come after a terrible inward conflict which leaves scars long visible, and tender places which thrill at the slightest touch with a sharp sickening pang.

On such a point the most competent will be also the most cautious critic ; and unhappily with few of us are the moods of strenuous aspiration either sufficiently frequent or sufficiently intense to enable us to gauge the pain which must be theirs who with unwavering constancy press towards the mark of some divine calling. But one may state an impression where it would be presumptuous to pronounce a verdict ; and it does seem to me that in George Eliot's works, taken as a whole, there is rather too emphatic dwelling on the association of high aims and terrible surrenders ; that the simple pleasures which the performance of duty so often brings to those who are graciously natured and nurtured are unduly ignored in order to bring into stronger relief the grander, more solemn joys which are the crown of heartrending agonies. We have, however, the virtues of our defects as well as the defects of our virtues ; and if this peculiarity of George Eliot's presentations of life be a defect it is one to which

they owe much of their ethically bracing character. The air which blows through her books may be too keen for tender constitutions, but it is clear and pure; and those who can endure it feel that their eyes are purged, their pulse quickened, their vitality intensified—that they have ascended to a region in which from the heart they can say "It is good to be here."

Then, lastly, one cannot refrain from noting the peculiar, and one may say unique, ethical character which is given to George Eliot's work by her constant and apparently instinctive habit of connecting the life of the individual with the life of humanity, and of associating a great moral exaltation or regeneration with the recognition by any individual human being of the ties which bind him to his fellows and make him a member of a body. With all her strong faculty of individualization, which makes her separate creations more vivid and realizable than any which have appeared in English literature since the days of Shakspere, she never ignores what Emerson calls the over-soul, the humanity which belongs to no single man but only to the race, the something which we do not possess but of which we are possessed, the great background upon which the lines of character are drawn. The noblest of her men and women live nobly from the first, or obtain nobility at the last by a conscious grasp of the infinite obligations laid upon them by the far reaching ties of human brotherhood. In Dinah Morris,

upon whose heart night and day lies the burden of the poor hungering souls to whom it has been given her to break the bread of life; in Romola, awakened by the voice at the roadside to the sight of a wider world than that filled by her own happiness or her own agony; in Daniel Deronda, to whom the fuller and the richer life comes through the discovery of the bond of kinship which gives him an interest in the glorious traditions and the high anticipations of his nation; in these, and in such widely opposed creations as Hetty, Tito, and Rosamund Vincy, we are made to feel the infinite moral difference which is involved in the recognition or non-recognition of the solidarity of the race, of the truth that if one member suffer all other members suffer with it, that the glad shout of every moral victory, the sad wail of every defeat, has echoes which may resound through the ages, that the growing good of the world is evermore "partly dependent upon unhistoric acts," and that so, to continue her own words, the fact "that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs."

This constant apprehension and clear presentation of the wider issues which life involves; this large outlook in virtue of which the writer takes the world—not the narrow world of society novelists but that in which divine laws have room to play—for her stage, as John Wesley took it for

his parish, gives to her books a certain ethical grandeur for which in most work of a similar character we look in vain. In much of the fiction of our day we have fair pictures of the dim cloisters, the tenderly tinted boudoirs, the trimly kept gardens, the luxuriant meadow lands of life; in hers alone we never lose sight of the solemn sky bending down to far horizons with haunting suggestions of a wider world beyond.

X

Having thus followed the course of the ethical current in English fiction from its far-off sources to the familiar banks on which we stand to watch the wavelets, it is natural to ask what is likely to be the direction of its future flow. To this question, however, it is impossible to return an adequate answer. One thing only can with certainty be affirmed, that in the future as in the past its onward progress will be marked by a deepening of its channel and a widening of its stream. We can no more return in fiction to the uncomplicated Æsop-like ethics of our earlier novelists than in music we can return to the simple melodies and harmonies which satisfied the first masters. Life has become so intertwined with complicated moral problems, problems which every day become more numerous and more perplexing, that any picture of life in which they are ignored—to which they do not give a tone where they fail to provide a motive—must be regarded

as frankly decorative work, devoid of any naturalistic aim.' That such work will be produced is certain, and it is equally certain that it will fail to impress the world or to touch any who are outside the coterie of mere literary connossieurs. It is never necessary that art should be didactic, but it is always necessary that it should be veracious, and henceforward veracity will be unattainable by the novelist who leaves unregarded those insistent moral issues which give to human life its highest and its deepest interest.